

Top 10 Misconceptions That Sabotage Marketing to Mature Audiences #5: **Disrespect will go unnoticed.**

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Communicating across cultures is always a challenge in advertising. Accounting for all of the cultural differences — such as language, humor, etiquette, and idioms — can be difficult, so marketers know to take special care in preparing their messaging. However, they often fail to apply the same care when communicating across generations, particularly to older adult audiences. Whether it's because of subliminal age-related biases, or simply a lack of awareness of its importance, many marketers do not take the time or effort to understand the subtleties, nuances, and proprieties that are unique to elder generations.

Without even knowing it, companies can allow “ageism” — assumptions about a person's roles in society based solely on their age — to creep into their communications.¹ It's a term that usually refers to stereotyping and devaluation of seniors — and a practice that marketers should guard against at all cost.

Why? First of all, many assumptions people make about older adults are false. As we've seen in previous white papers, a majority of older adults do not fall under the categories or display the characteristics that ageism defines for them. Secondly, older adults will notice — and opt for brands that respect them, their needs, and their preferences. And finally, it's simply the right thing to do. As Kim Miller, vice president, sales and marketing, Willow Valley Retirement Communities, so eloquently put it in 2006, “Ageism is the last socially condoned bigotry. Unlike so many cultures where age is honored and elders of society revered, older Americans endure ugly, misguided stereotypes and must fight for a place at a table they themselves worked to build.”²

This disrespect toward older adults has resulted in large organizations taking notice and action. In the healthcare arena, the World Health Organization partnered with International Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse to discuss strategies on how to combat elder abuse, the most serious form of ageism.³ In the marketing industry, watchdog groups have been organized and predatory advertising regulations have been put in place to protect older adults from this thinly veiled form of prejudice.

However, an even more effective and enduring response to this issue is simply for marketers to raise awareness and empathy for older adults, who become victims because of 1) their need for our help and 2) their desire to trust marketers to do the right thing. This white paper examines examples of ageism in advertising and other industries — and provides a sobering warning for marketers who subscribe to the misconception that disrespect to older adults will go unnoticed.

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AGEISM: AN UNHEALTHY PRACTICE

To help those in marketing and advertising—where disrespect toward older adults is sometimes more subtle—fully understand the perils of ageism, it's useful to study a more extreme example. And nowhere are the effects of ageism more obvious than in the healthcare industry where older adults have forced providers to rethink aging and the treatment choices they make.

For example, between 2001 and 2008, the largest increase in the number of rotator cuff and knee surgeries was among patients over 61, according to the national data compiled by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.⁴ Previously, these were the kind of procedures that doctors, based on a patient's advanced age, would often recommend treating with cortisone injections and physical therapy. While doctors are rightly concerned with the risks involved (such as the effects of anesthetic on older adults), many never consider that older patients would consider

the risks worth taking to return to activities such as tennis and swimming with full capabilities. In fact, one patient responded to his doctor's suggestion of a more conservative treatment by saying, "I'd rather be dead if I can't play tennis. Fix the damn thing."⁴ Considering the data, it appears that this is not an isolated sentiment.

Nor is sports medicine an isolated example of how ageism affects the way older adults are treated. One study showed that older stroke patients are actually less likely to receive appropriate diagnostic tests and lifestyle advice from their doctors than younger patients—despite the fact that older patients are just as receptive to lifestyle advice, and just as likely to reap the benefits of it.⁵ The researchers concluded that "a change in the attitude of healthcare professionals is needed to root out ageism." While advertisers and marketers are not dealing with life and death, it's clear that they, too, could benefit from an attitude adjustment when it comes to older adults.

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MARKETER KNOWS BEST?

There are many negative stereotypes that stem from ageism and have an impact on the behaviors of older adults. One of the most common traps that advertisers and marketers fall into is the underlying assumption that older adults' physical and mental challenges have somehow rendered them helpless or incompetent. This leads to a "we know what's good for you" tone that may not be apparent to the marketer but screams loud and clear to the audience. Studies show that attitudes and beliefs like this not only negatively affect older adults, but also the people who perpetuate them. How people view the aging process actually has an enormous impact on how successfully they navigate it.^{6,7}

Ads that portray these stereotypes of older adults as being helpless or incompetent are particularly offensive—but there are many other negative stereotypes that show up in advertising and marketing. One 2002 report listed several negative stereotypes about older adults that advertisers commonly used.² The author notes that while there is a shred of truth behind each

one, lumping all older adults into these stereotypes is disrespectful and will be noticed. They include the misconceptions that all older adults:

- Are ill, or in failing health
- Lose interest in intimacy
- Are unwilling to try anything new
- Lose control of bodily functions
- Can't function in the workplace
- Have trouble understanding technology
- Have no social life
- Cannot fully participate or pull their own weight
- Need help making decisions

These stereotypes are fueled by marketers who themselves view aging in a negative light, and project it into their messaging. Indirectly, they're saying, "since you are older and are unable to make sound decisions, take our advice." This approach will not fly with today's dynamic, diverse older adult audience—and may cause them to seek brands that respect their abilities.

WHY YOU SHOULD RESPECT YOUR ELDERS

Demeaning and offensive messages in ads and product marketing can lead to a backlash from older adults. While this seems almost too obvious to mention, many companies still violate this seemingly intuitive notion—either through the stereotypical messaging we've discussed, or simply by not seeing older adults as part of the consumer population and ignoring them entirely. In a special 2002 Senate committee hearing on aging, Senator John Breaux said, "It is clear that the media's obsession with youth often comes at the expense of older Americans. In the quest to target youth, media and marketing have ignored the purchasing power and preferences of millions of Baby Boomers and seniors across the country."⁸

Portraying older adults in a demeaning fashion may even be a self-fulfilling prophecy, by diminishing their self-esteem to the point where they eventually make fewer purchases.⁹ Some researchers agree, concluding that when older adults see fewer and fewer messages directed at them, they gradually lose their sense of self as a consumer, which decreases their spending.¹⁰

With more than 70 million baby boomers⁸—and baby boomer advertising in the process of becoming the next big category¹¹—it would be a titanic opportunity missed if marketers continue to disrespect older adults.

CHANGING THE MARKETING MINDSET

While it's never easy to change course, it's sometimes necessary. Brands that take a fresh look at how they communicate with older adults and tailor their messaging to this vast and growing audience—carefully crafting the tone to be respectful of older adults' preferences and ability to make sound consumer decisions—could tap into the vast potential this category offers.

One way to start is to embrace Wolfe and Snyder’s “Ageless Market,”¹² which views consumers based on behaviors, not age—which eliminates the stereotypes behind such demographics. In Martino Flynn’s Mature Market Practice, our top strategic criteria are 1) suitability (is this product appropriate for the prospective buyer?) and 2) balanced messaging (does it promote informed evaluation and purchase?). It’s a simple, but effective approach because it genuinely respects the older audience’s desire to trust us to help them choose. Older consumers want to trust brands again—but that trust must be earned through honesty and respect.

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CONCLUSION

Generation gaps are real. But as trained communications professionals, marketers must transcend their own biases or they will be revealed in what they say and how they say it—whether overtly or subtly. Where older adults are concerned, taking a “we know best” tone is particularly risky because it conveys an underlying disrespect for their intellect and intuitiveness.

Thoughtfulness is an important virtue to older adults. If marketing communications targeted to them are thoughtfully prepared, older audiences will notice and respond positively. Conversely, they will look elsewhere when marketers perpetuate tired and offensive stereotypes in their communications. And even if the target audiences don’t call marketers on it, watchdog groups are dedicated to making sure that older Americans are treated fairly.

Marketing messages need to be balanced, complete, and honest. To accomplish this, here are some important points to remember:

- it’s critical to go beyond demographic information and understand the behaviors and motivations of older adults
- older adults are similar to teenagers in that they just want to be treated like an adult, not talked down to
- never generalize the mature market; it’s too diverse and dynamic
- stereotypes of older adults may contain a shred of truth, but it’s extremely disrespectful to encourage and support them
- embracing these stereotypes can have a harmful backlash on your company

Most importantly, look for ways to accommodate older audiences in your marketing materials that improve your interaction and communications with them: the pace of the messaging, the size of the type and imagery, or the formality of the tone and appearance (see our previous white paper on misconception #9, “Designing your website with older audiences in mind will ‘wreck’ it,” for details). It’s a good kind of challenge, where investing the time and effort will improve the outcomes for everyone. The bottom line is that all marketers who communicate with older adults should adopt a tone of respect in their communications—for the benefit of themselves and their customers.

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